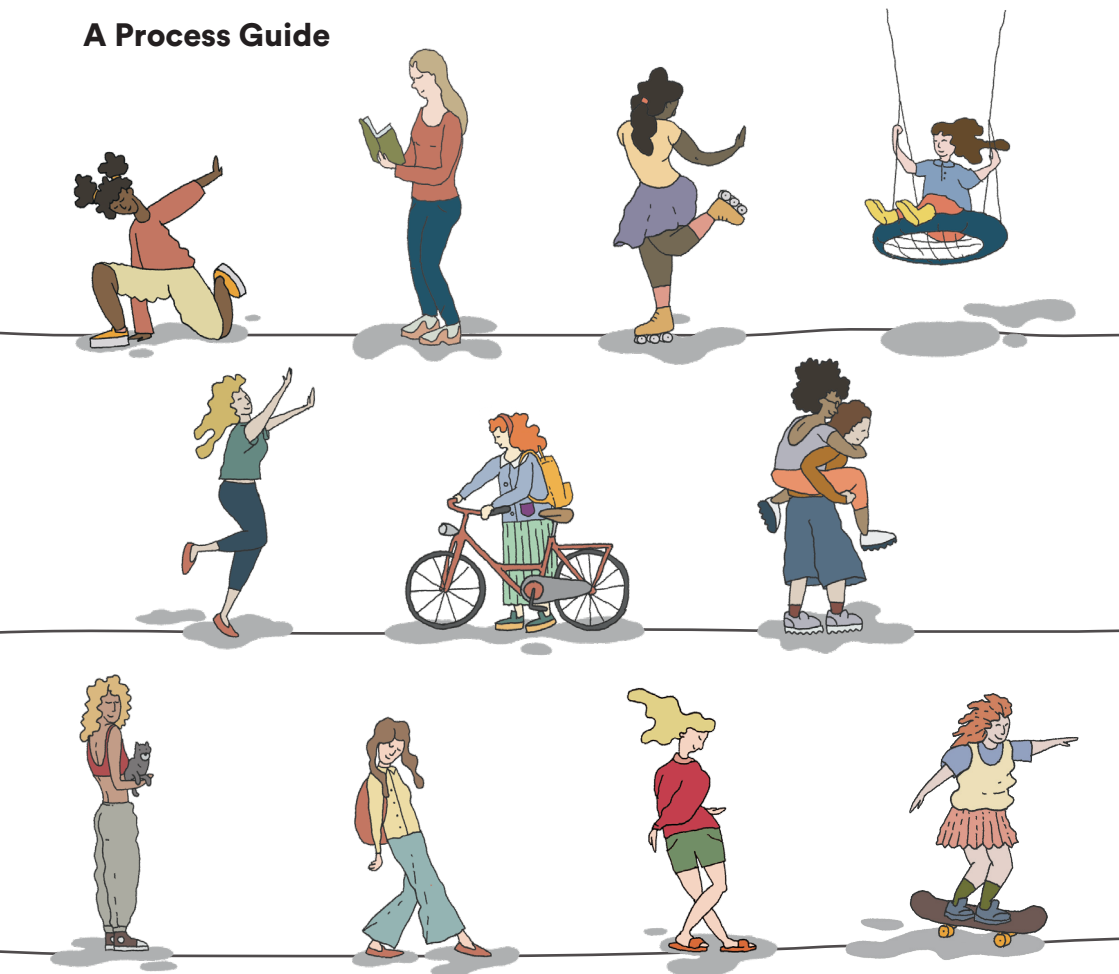# Urban Minded

How can the design of urban spaces contribute to the mental well-being of teenage girls?

A Process Guide

Henning Larsen — **RAMBØLL** FONDEN **SDU**

Urban Minded

How can the design of urban spaces contribute to the mental health of teenage girls?

A Process Guide
2023

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A Consequential Point of Departure

The design of our cities can have a significant effect on our well-being and mental health. This Process Guide examines this intricate connection by exploring how it can be addressed through user involvement, with the aim of designing spaces in which all can thrive.

As a pillar of the socially sustainable city, the well-being of urban residents is incredibly important to generating social impact and deconstructing social structures that limit certain groups. And while the mental health of girls and young women continues to decrease[1], the link between the design of our urban environments and the promotion of mental health amongst this group remains unclear. As a result, the diverse needs of girls and young women are, at best, generalized within the field of urban design – an issue that this project has set out to address.
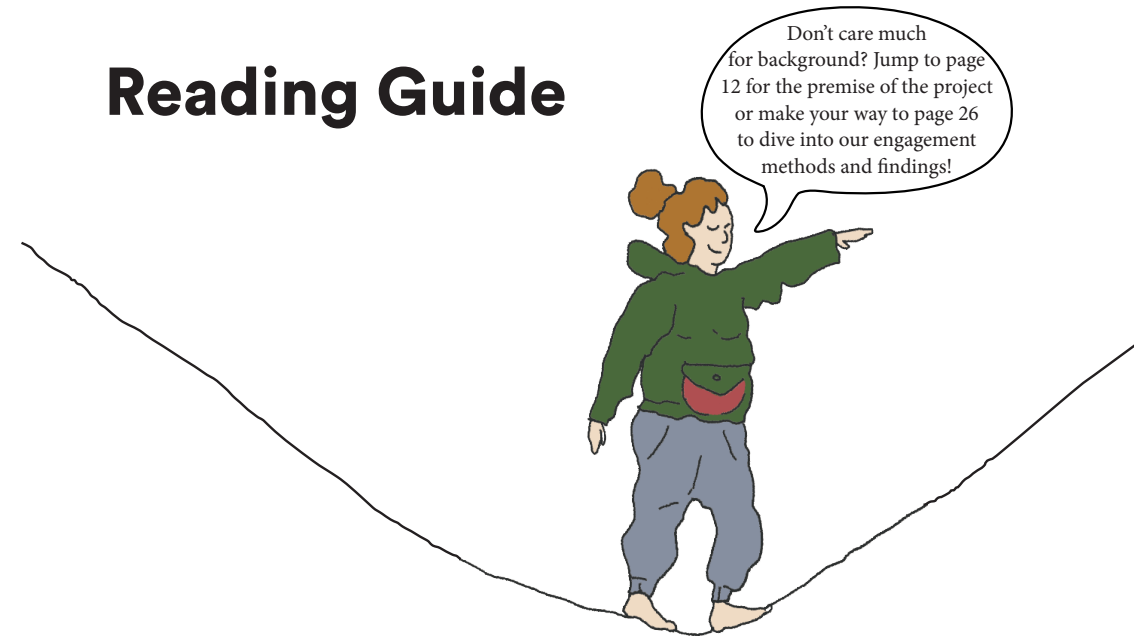
A collaboration between Henning Larsen and the Danish National Institute of Public Health, with the support of the Ramboll Foundation, 'Urban Minded' is a research project that was carried out in Copenhagen over the course of several months in 2022 and 2023.

Generating a truly complex and nuanced understanding of teenage girls aged 14-16 and their relations to the city, the project demonstrates the potentials of qualitative research and intersectional perspectives in informing inclusive designs.

Having collected, analyzed, translated, and curated data from the research, the booklet you have in front of you is the result of a multidisciplinary collaboration between landscape architects, urban designers, and anthropologists at Henning Larsen.

[1]Agenda Alliance, Women's Mental Health Facts, https://www.agendaalliance.org/our-work/projects-and-campaigns/womens-mental-health-facts/

Reading Guide

Don't care much for background? Jump to page 12 for the premise of the project or make your way to page 26 to dive into our engagement methods and findings!

This Process Guide is the first of two booklets that are the product of Henning Larsen's research and design project 'Urban Minded'. The two publications can be read separately or together; with the second building upon the first.

With the aim of inspiring others to engage in similar processes of user engagement, this booklet focuses on the project's approach and methodology; while the second booklet presents design proposals informed by the study.

They are intended for anyone interested in re-imagining public urban spaces or working with urban design and planning. Whether a municipality exploring urban development, a designer working on masterplans, or consultants engaged in urban strategies - we hope they support anyone wanting to promote the design of inclusive spaces.

Enjoy reading!

Reading guide:

'Definition boxes' describing different concepts and ideas.

'Findings boxes' presenting some of our findings from the project.

Quotes from our expert group that support the findings and concepts.

Quotes from girls who participated in the project.
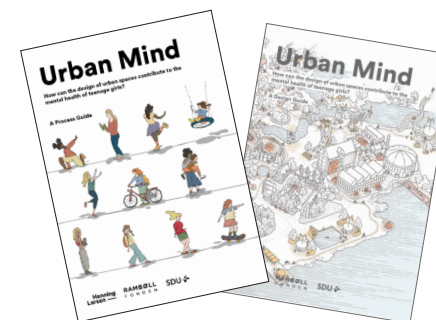
Teenage Girls, Urban Spaces & Mental Health

Focusing on the age group of 14-16, we set out to explore the following question: **How can design of urban spaces contribute to the mental health and well-being of teenage girls?**

In unpacking this question, we identified three important challenges and aims to work with throughout:

1. How do we design public urban spaces that are more appealing to teenage girls?
2. How do we design urban spaces in ways that contribute to the mental health and well-being of teenage girls?
3. How do we avoid falling into gender stereotypes while focusing on teenage girls in the design?

Parks

Places

Movement

And even bridges...

Playgrounds

Shopping Streets

Urban Squares

Urban space is also the site of our ordinary movements in the city… walking to school, going to university, feeling safe at the metro station at night… these are all part of how we experience urban spaces.

What is an urban space?
Urban space in a city can be many things. It could be destinations such as public squares, playgrounds and parks, but it could also be paths, bridges, and the like. In other words, urban spaces include both 'delineated places' as well as movement between those places.

Camilla Van Deurs
City Architect, Copenhagen

Research Design

To explore this subject and answer these questions, our research approach, consisted of the following:

Fieldwork
Engaging in various qualitative methods of data collection, our fieldwork centered on collecting lived experiences and personal perspectives voiced by 25 teenage girls living in Copenhagen.
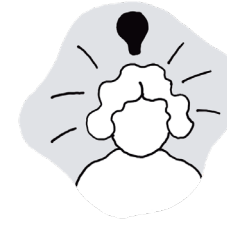
Experts
We have collected the insights of professionals from various fields, including public health, psychology, physical education, gender studies, and more. This expert group also provided feedback on our work and findings along the way.

Literature
Our collaborators at The Danish Institute for Public Health (Statens Institut for Folkesundhed, University of Southern Denmark) have conducted a literature review on the topic.

Bridging a Gap Between Fields

Urban spaces are sites of simultaneousness. They are places where infinite things happen at once. However, when approaching our study, we found that research on teenage girls, well-being, and use of urban spaces is rather scattered and siloed, and tended to overlook the overlaps between them (see pages 20-21 for more on this). To bridge this gap with an interdisciplinary and intersectional perspective, we gathered a group of experts from various fields. Here they are!

Camilla Van Deurs
City Architect, Copenhagen

Kaya Roessler
Architecture Psychologist
Professor, Dr.phil., SDU

Cecilie Nørgaard
Director at Mangfold , Education and Gender Sociologist

Laura Bendix Pedersen
Innovation Officer, GAME

Carsten Friberg
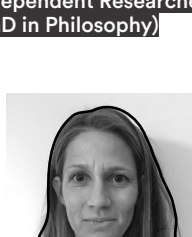Independent Researcher
(PhD in Philosophy)

Marie Astrup
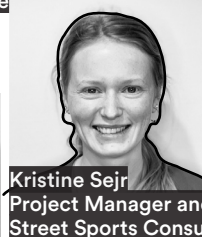Architect and Founder
at OpNed

Natasja Lund
Anthropologist, Consultant,
CFBU

Signe Højbjerre Larsen
Researcher and Ph.D. SDU

Katrine Rich Madsen
Senior Researcher,
Public Health, SIF, SDU

Kristine Sejr
Project Manager and
Street Sports Consultant,
DGI

Mikkel Hjort
Landscape Architect and
Researcher, KADK

How are design of urban spaces and mental health related?

Mapping out the precise relationship between mental health and the use of urban spaces is a daunting task, as their connection is correlative rather than causal. However, we are aware that such a relationship does exist and demands attention.

Recent research from the UK reveals that if children and teenagers can't play outside it has a negative impact on how they feel. A survey conducted by Girlguiding, the UK's largest youth organization dedicated to girls, found that children aged 6-18 said that not being able to play outside makes them: feel sad (24%), feel as if they don't do as much exercise (21%), feel less free (17%), and feel lonely (15%).[2]

!
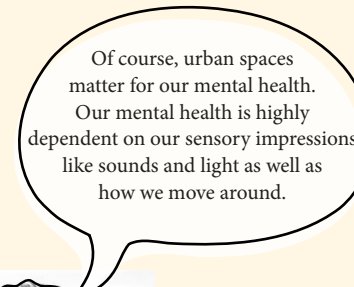
While we don't expect to solve the issue of mental health or think that we can design a solution to the many challenges that young people face, we do wish to identify how experiences within the built environment can be harnessed to support and strengthen the individual. At the very least this means actively considering their perspectives as to not contribute further to negative experiences within public space.

> Of course, urban spaces matter for our mental health. Our mental health is highly dependent on our sensory impressions like sounds and light as well as how we move around.

Kaya Roessler
Architecture Psychologist
Professor, Dr.phil., SDU

> Mental health is also about having the opportunity to be with other people and be part of activities in the public space. If you don't get the opportunity to do that, then you don't meet your social needs.

Natasja Lund
Anthropologist, Consultant,
CFBU

[2]Research briefing: Children's access to adventure and play, GirlGuiding, 2020

The Burning Platform

There are many reasons why we focus on teenage girls in this project; the disparities in the use of urban outdoor spaces between teenage girls and boys, the persistence of gendered narratives about girls, and an increasing vulnerability to issues related to mental health. As well as the unquestionable significance of girls' teenage years and their inspiring eagerness to be heard.
We have lots to say on these matters - the following pages outline the above in more detail.

01 Girls and young women in urban spaces

Despite progress made on our paths to gender equality, our cities are still the sites of an urban heritage where the needs of woman and girls, like the needs of many others groups, were neglected in the design of public space. In an effort to deconstruct this heritage (pun intended!), we must continuously ask ourselves - how can we design the invitation for these groups into our cities?

Even though data on the use of urban spaces by different genders is scarce and scattered, existing research on selected active urban

spaces in Denmark shows that these spaces are predominantly dominated by boys and adult men. For example, an observation from 2011 showed that Multipladsen in Nørrebro, an urban space located in a densely populated neighborhood in Copenhagen, had nearly seven times more teenage boys than teenage girls using the space. [3]

> I think we may have built too many active urban spaces. We also need to take a break in our city, and that would benefit everyone, both the teenage girls, but also the seniors and other groups. It seems like (in the modern city) there must be activities everywhere, and we may well miss the break somewhere.
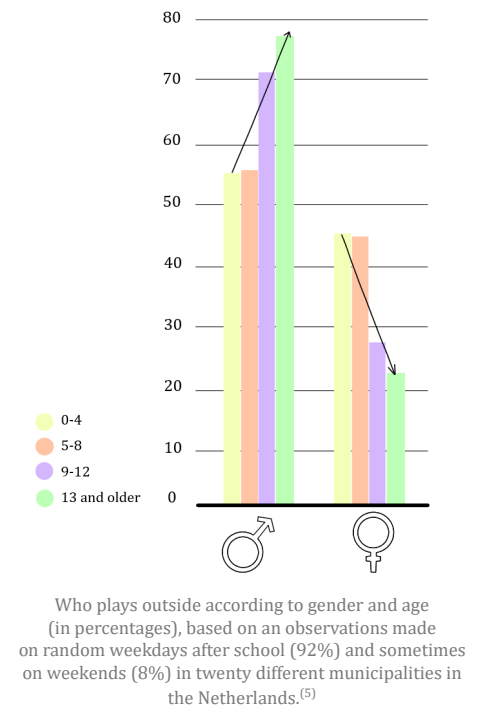
**Mikkel Hjort
Landscape Architect and
Researcher, KADK**

A study from Sweden (2012) indicated that only 20% of teenage girls and women use outdoor areas for spontaneous sport activities, compared to 80% of boys and men. [4]

Use of outdoor areas for spontaneous sport activities
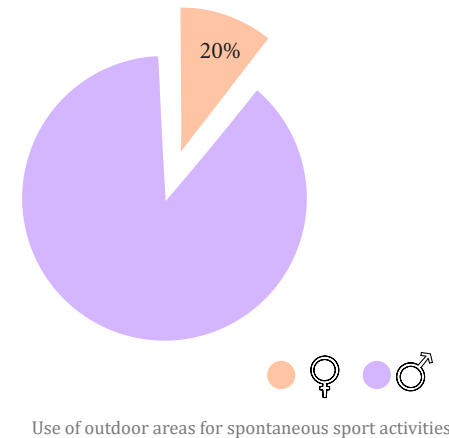
Research from the Netherlands (2021) further reveals that the percentage of girls playing outside decreases from 45% in the age group of 0-4 to 23% in the age group of 13 and older, while the corresponding percentage for boys increases from 55% in the age group of 0-4 to 77% in the age group of 13 and older. [5]

These statistics demonstrate an inequality in the use of active urban spaces between genders. (Note that data for other types of urban spaces such as green and recreational areas, streets, etc., is harder to come by.)

0-4
5-8
9-12
13 and older

Who plays outside according to gender and age (in percentages), based on an observations made on random weekdays after school (92%) and sometimes on weekends (8%) in twenty different municipalities in the Netherlands. [5]

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[3] Byens Bevægelsesrum, Et studie af byrums evner til at fremme fysisk aktivitet og møde mellem mennesker, Ministeriet for By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2011

[4] Blomdahl, U., Elofsson, S. & Åkesson, M. (2012): Spontanidrott för vilka? En studie av kön och nyttjande av planlagda utomhusytor för spontanidrott under sommarhalvåret. IDROTTSFÖRVALTNINGEN, Stockholm Universitet

[5] https://urbanspringtime.blogspot.com/2021/12/playing-outside-who-where-and-what.html

02 Narratives and norms

Many gendered narratives and norms persist in our societies and cultures as, what we recognize as, well-rooted social constructs. Images of the "brave and outdoorsy boy" vs. the "pretty and perfect girl" remain dominant despite the growing awareness and changing attitudes toward them. Many things around us, from colors and clothes to activities and conduct, still seem gendered even though they have little if any real grounding in what it means to be a girl or a boy. [6]

This project seeks to challenge and diversify the narratives about teenage girls. Rather than generalizing their needs, we turn our attention to their rich and nuanced lived experiences.

Teenage girls don't say it directly, but they are not done play-ing. So, it is unfair to take it away from them. They play all the time. And they play quite a lot. But they pretend they don't. If only they could use another word for play!

Marie Astrup
Architect and Founder at OpNed

We shouldn't paint a picture of girls as a homogeneous group that just has one huge need to sit and chitchat.

Laura Bendix Pedersen
Innovation Officer, GAME

The norms say girls should be passive, adorable, care about their appearance, and not be so loud. The narrative about boys say that they should be physically and mentally strong, slightly rough, not so good at taking care of themselves and they should not show emotions. When urban space reproduces these narratives, the norms become even stronger, and it becomes more difficult to diverge from them.

Cecilie Nørgaard
**Director at Mangfold , Education and Gender Sociologist**

Gathered as qualitative data, these lived experience form a broad spectrum of voices and points of view, and a detailed understanding of how they might play out in the landscape of a city. This is a significant step towards inclusive design in that it helps us grasp experiences of and in the city that are positioned outside of dominant narratives. These are lived experiences associated with user groups that are typically not in focus.

With the knowledge that the design of our cities can have a significant impact on our well-being, we need to be better at accommodating differences, offering space for everyone to thrive. As a start, this research demonstrates how urban design can be better informed by working with a range of perspectives, preferences, and lived experiences.

03 Mental health

Whether tied to the pressures of individualization and social media or the existential threat related to climate change, the generation that is now coming of age is facing many risks relating to mental health. As the graph to the right indicates, girls and young women face a much higher risk of suffering from stress and various mental health challenges than boys and young men of the same age group. [7]

Acknowledging, the impact that the design of our surroundings can have on our well-being makes the particular perspectives of this user group extremely important to recognize and address through an intersectional lens.

Percentage with low score on the mental health scale [7]
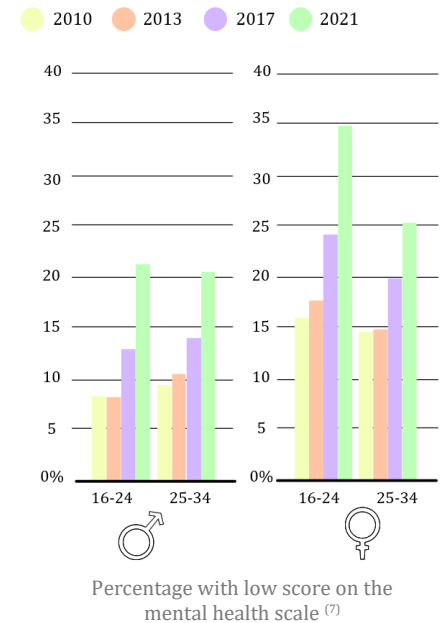
What do we talk about when we talk about intersectional design?

Formulated by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality acts as a metaphor for understanding how multiple aspects of one's identity combine and result in circumstances of social and structural vulnerability. [8]

Seen from an intersectional perspective, this project looks at the overlapping identities of 'teenager' and 'girl', and acknowledges that this combination of age and gender forms a unique social positioning that demands our attention.

The idea is not to generalize about members of this group but to recognize the specific barriers that they face in using public spaces.

An intersectional lens demands that we acknowledge all the aspects of one's identity that lend themselves to social vulnerability. These might include ethnic background, sexual orientation, physical ability and stature, socio-economic status, and neurodivergence - just to name a few. In doing so, intersectionality makes room for more nuance in lived experiences!

[6] Butler, J. (2006). Gender Trouble. Routledge.

[7] Danskernes Sundhed – Den Nationale Sundhedsprofil 2021- SDU

[8] Crenshaw, K. (1991): 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', Stanford Law Review, 43(6), p. 1241.

04 Inbetween-ness

Teenage years hold significant importance in our lives. A key characteristic of this time (and an important finding in our research) is a sense of 'inbetween-ness' that straddles childhood and adulthood, embodying both at times, and at others neither. We view this as a uniquely insightful time in a person's life.

Similar to many other aspects of a teenager's life, their relationship with the city is ever-evolving. As they are allowed more freedom to discover and explore the city on their own, the city becomes the backdrop for their own growth and self-discovery. Balancing internalized expectations and barriers that in many cases are related to norms and narratives (e.g. You must excel

in what you do! Behave yourself! Act mature!) while simultaneously growing into a sense of agency was a central and dominant theme in our findings.

On one hand, the girls experience more independence and freedom to make their own decisions, to develop their interests, to express themselves and form their own opinions. During this time in their lives, they are gradually exploring notions of adulthood and actively forming their own relationship with their physical surroundings. On the other hand - whether due to a strict curfew, a limited budget, perceptions of safety, or expectations of their guardians, friends, and society - they are still subject to many barriers and limitations.

When you're a kid you're just following your parents but when you grow up, you get to know the city more and explore it for yourself. You get to find hidden things and secret places.

Many young people struggle to find spaces where they can really let go, places where they don't have to perform or think about what others think about them.

Kristine Sejr
Project Manager and
Street Sports Consultant,
DGI

I feel like this is just an awkward age where you're not an adult but you're not a kid either. It feels like you're expected to act more mature but you also can't act too mature... If I were to go on those swings, there would be no one around my age. It's like I'm too old for them. But if I were to smoke over on the side, people would think I'm too young for that.

*It's just awkward that way.
Sometimes I want to be older but I feel like that also comes with way more responsibility. Other times I just want to be a kid again, and have my problems solve themselves with a hug from my mom.*

The city has rhythms that dictate how we should move. Places are designed and programmed for certain things, and our movement becomes very narrow. A city contains layers upon layers of physical limitations (roads, paths, etc.), but there are also other limitations: norms for how we must be and act in public spaces… And those norms are not defined by teenage girls.

Carsten Friberg
Independent Researcher
(PhD in Philosophy)

Girls Growing Up

Even though girls of this age group should not be generalized or boxed into one way of being, it is still important to note some important transitions and tendencies that happen during this time in their lives.

Through their teenage years, many girls...

...stop playing outside

...gain access and freedom

...start using the city without adults

...step into a new social life

...stop participating in organised sports

...start getting used to their new body

...internalize societal expectations

...become aware of others' gaze

| Pre-teen | 14-16 years old | 18 years old |
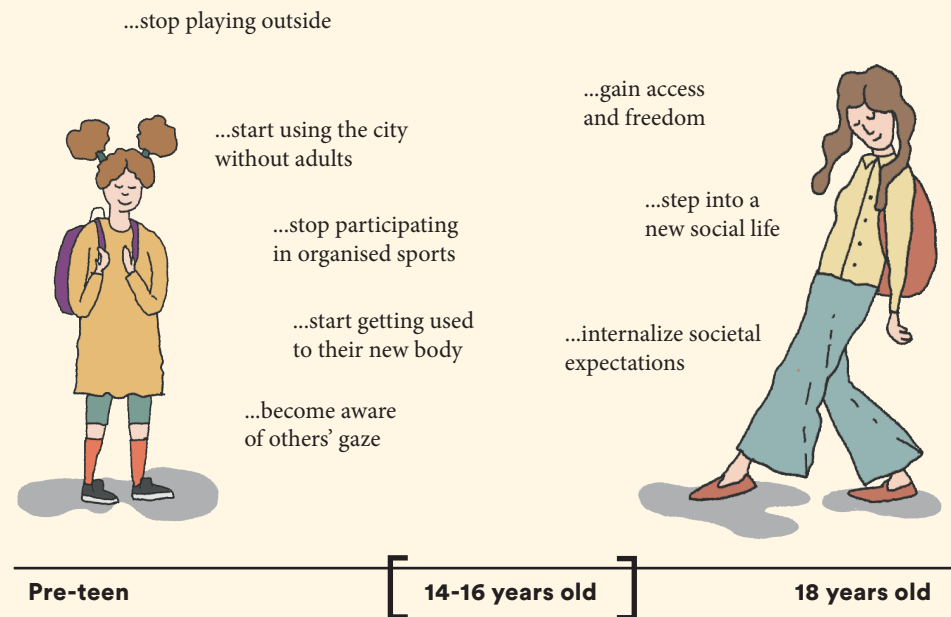
05 A wish to be heard

This is an obvious reflection but still incredibly important to note - like most of us, teenage girls wish to feel seen and to be heard. Despite this wish, however, their experiences are lined with a sense that assumptions are continuously being made about their lives. Teenagers are simply not used to being asked for their opinions. Besides there being a lot that we can learn in order to improve urban spaces, simply acknowledging these young women as experts on their own lives offers an important opportunity for empowerment.

I think grown-ups make a lot of assumptions about what it's like to be young. They think we're lazy, and weird, and that we're always on social media. And of course we're different to grown-ups, we're a different generation. But between us we're not all the same.

We don't all deal with the same problems. Older people should just stop and listen a bit more because otherwise you can't know what's on our mind. It's just wrong to make assumptions about why people are doing what they are doing.

So, what did the Literature Review reveal?

Thoroughly scouring databases and reference lists of systemic reviews, our partners at The National Institute of Public Health provided us with a Literature Review of existing research and publications on the subject of teenage girls, mental health, and urban spaces. Based on this review, they highlighted four factors in urban public spaces, that can contribute to mental health among young people. These include (1) green urban spaces, (2) accessibility and safety, (3) spaces for physical activity, and (4) spaces for social development.

Limitations of the Literature Review
It is necessary to note that the literature found based on the search criteria was extremely limited. Due to a lack of research on the topic, the search had to be expanded to include studies involving children and studies conducted outside the Scandinavian and European context. It was therefore not possible for them to provide specific insights into the factors or elements that contribute to mental health among 14-16 year-old girls in Scandinavia and Europe.
The review was based on seven articles,

two systematic reviews, and a synthesis, of which only a few of these texts are European. This entails limitations regarding the generalizability of our findings.

Furthermore, the four categories the literature review could highlight are rather generic and unnuanced, making it difficult to use them as design drivers. Once again, we see this as a lack of focus on the topic of teenage girls, mental health, and urban spaces.

While we were already compelled to engage with the user group in planning this project, the need for seeking their lived experiences became even clearer following the rather thin conclusions of the Literature Review.


Green urban spaces
The majority of the reviewed articles establish a connection between the mental health of young people and the accessibility and quality of green urban areas, these are more or less delimited areas within cities with varying degrees of vegetation, and in some cases, the presence of water. As an example, a British study stated that exposure to "woodlands" can reduce behavioral and emotional problems in children and young people aged 5-18.[9]

Spaces for physical activity
We know that in general physical activity can be a promoting factor in improving mental health among children and young people, as well as adults.[10] However, only two of the articles emphasized the potential to encourage increased physical activity through urban spaces as a mental health-promoting element among young people. None of the articles provided an account of the measures that encourage young people to engage in more physical activity.
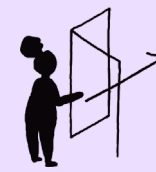
Accessibility and safety
The availability of green areas, (i.e. proximity to where young people live or frequent and whether open or surrounded by fences) is highlighted as an important aspect of their use. Studies also indicate that perceptions of safety also have great influence. The areas should be safe and feel secure both to approach and to stay in. Additionally, parents' or guardians' perceptions of an area's safety can also influence the extent to which children and young people use it.

Spaces for social development
In a Canadian study involving 23 young people aged 9-17, young women in particular expressed that elements such as benches, planters, flower pots, trees, and yards provide a sense of refuge and mental space, with their presence encouraging social opportunities and inviting them to hang out.[11]

[9] Birch J, Rishbeth C, Payne S R. Nature doesn't judge you; how urban nature supports young people's mental health and wellbeing in a diverse UK city. Health Place. 2020 Mar;62:102296.

[10] Wales M, Mårtensson F, Hoff E, Jansson M. Elevating the Role of the Outdoor Environment for Adolescent Wellbeing in Everyday Life. Front. Psychol., 03 March 2022. Sec. Environmental Psychology.

[11] Buttazoni A, Dean J, Minaker L. Urban design and adolescent mental health: A qualitative examination of adolescent emotional responses to pedestrian- and transit-oriented design and cognitive architecture concepts. Health Place 2022 Jul;76:102815

The Significance of a Lived Experience

In social sciences, engaging in qualitative data collection is often framed as the attempt to see through the eyes of others, gaining insight into their personal perspectives and social contexts.[12] In gathering this form of data, researchers take on the challenge of "making sense of how other people make sense".[13]

In contrast to quantitative data collection that seeks as large a sample group as possible to identify a pattern, gathering lived experiences through qualitative methods aims for nuance, depth and richness. It is these that support us in understanding the 'what's', 'why's', and 'how's' of the wider social group.

We cannot stress enough how important it is to engage directly with users. Analyzed lived experiences acted as the anchor in our project, ensuring that the design process was informed by and committed to the girls' perspectives. The entire project simply would not have looked the same without them.

Engaging directly helps us to:

Bridge the gap where information is lacking.
Lived experiences can act as a bridge between siloed knowledge, as they demonstrate an assemblage of different aspects that play out in people's lives. They tell us what matters most to them.

Understand the reasons for a pattern, instead of only finding the pattern.
Gathering lived experiences can allow us to investigate the depths of a pattern and the plausible reasons behind it. In this way, qualitative data is a great means of supporting quantitative data.

Break down the stereotypes.
Collecting lived experience from different members of a user group diversifies the image of the members that on first glance might seem homogeneous.

Empower the user group.
Qualitative research puts people's experiences on center stage, making it known that their perspectives matter.

Deepen our understanding of generic terms from the perspective of the user group.
Values like privacy, safety, and identity could mean different things to different people. Lived experiences can help us understand how these are perceived, made sense of, acted upon, sought out, and more.

When to engage?
For findings to truly inform a design, it is important to conduct qualitative research early, really early, before ideas are formed, decisions are made, and any designs are sketched!
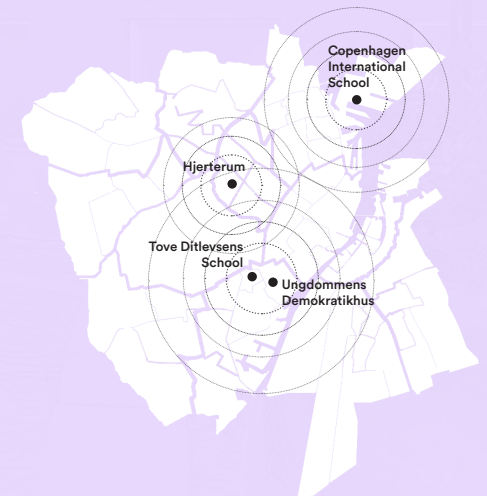
In this way, you can ensure that user engagement will not be an afterthought or a mere buzzword but rather, an actionable first step within a process that results in fruitful findings.

See where this has taken place in our process on the next page.

Collecting a Variety of Lived Experiences

With the ambition of collecting a diverse group of perspectives and voices, it was important for us to be intentional about who we engage. Though this may pose a challenge, it is crucial to engage with girls with different interests, from different parts of the city, different schools, and different socio-economic backgrounds.

These are the schools and organizations through which we got in contact with participants.

Copenhagen International School

Hjerterum

Tove Ditlevsens School

Ungdommens Demokratikhus

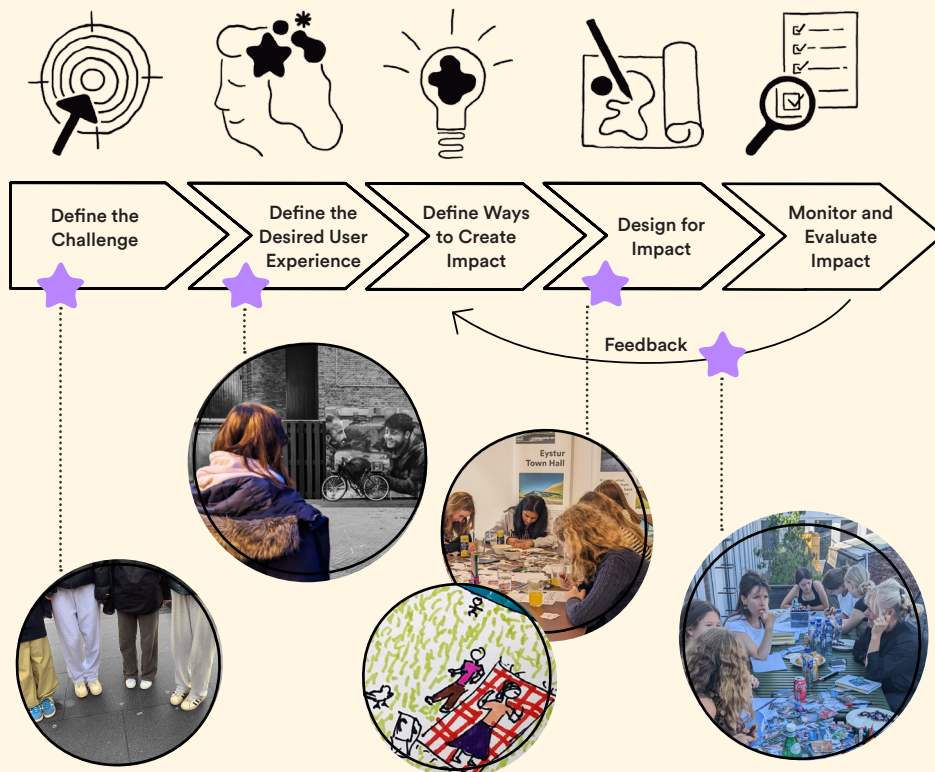[12]Bryman, A., (2004), 'The Nature of Qualitative Research' in 'Quantity and Quality in Social Research'.

[13]Salvador, T., Bell, G., and Anderson, K., (1999), 'Design Ethnography' in 'Design Management Journal - Fall 1999'.

Impact Driven Design

With a focus on inclusive design and positive social impact, we have adopted an impact driven design approach to support our process. We believe that the stages of this approach offer an iterative and systematic way of working within the intersection of design and social impact.

⭐ This is where we engage the users in the process.

Define the Challenge → Define the Desired User Experience → Define Ways to Create Impact → Design for Impact → Monitor and Evaluate Impact

Feedback

1. Define the Challenge
The first step is to define the challenges we want to solve, and the desired impact we want to create. The more precise we are in this phase, the easier it becomes to evaluate the project and to reiterate for better results.

2. Define the Desired User Experience
The next step is to define what kind of user experiences we want to create, when addressing the challenge.

3. Define Ways to Create Impact
Next we define the ways we can address the challenges and facilitate the desired experience.

4. Design for Impact
This is the design phase in which we translate ideas into designs that can facilitate the desired user experience.

5. Monitor and Evaluate Impact
In the last stage we monitor and evaluate our impact. The findings then feed back into stage 3 and validate it or, alternatively, point to new ways of creating the desired impact through an iterative process.

Based on the findings of this project, we have come up with a series of design proposals to create urban spaces that are more attractive for teenage girls and contribute to their mental health (see our design manual). These ideas will hopefully materialize in a few pilot projects that will be evaluated during 2024.

Qualitative Methods for Collecting Lived Experiences

There are many different ways to gather qualitative data and lived experiences. Methods should be chosen based on various considerations including context, access, available time, and more.

While we can't offer a cookie cutter approach, we hope you might be inspired by the methods that we applied in our project.

In our outreach efforts we came into contact with girls through various schools and after school programs. This was not necessarily easy. The schools, teachers and adults in charge, 'gatekeepers' to engagement, at times posed a challenge. However, parental guardians were supportive and most importantly, the girls themselves were very eager to share their experiences with us!!

Remember to check requirements for parental consent. You'll likely need a signed agreement with a legal guardian.

Walk-and-Talk Interviews
Semi-structured walk and talk interviews were central to this process. Some were conducted in small groups or in pairs while others were one on one. The girls would decide where in the city to meet and where we should go.

Lasting more or less 1.5 hrs in length, these interviews offered a window into how the girls think of and interact with the city. Which are their favorite places and why, how they like to get around, what they like and don't like... We learnt so much from these!

Some added benefit of this interview format is that the continuous stimuli can help the conversation with concrete examples that might be hard to describe without visual support. They also feel very casual, making it easier to talk openly and to establish that there are no right or wrong answers.

Video Diaries
The girls were asked to document two days of their choosing, a weekday and a day over the weekend, and to narrate as they go. They were encouraged to film clips of anything and anywhere in the city, whether with friends, walking along their favorite paths, doing an activity they enjoy, reflecting on an impression they have, sharing a memory or an experience they had in a place, etc.

The strength of this method is that it allowed us to gather the impressions of girls who might not feel comfortable in an interview setting and would wish to have more control and creative freedom in how they express themselves.

Initially many girls expressed interest in participating in this way, however this method required the least commitment and so the downside was that several girls decided to back out.

Workshops
We hosted two workshops, each with a group of five girls.

In a comfortable setting with pizza and candy (sorry parents), we were able to create a cosy atmosphere and a safe space for the girls to get creative and share their perspectives with us.

The first workshop acted as a method of data collection. The second workshop took place after the collected data was analyzed and served a dual purpose of gathering more insights while also validating our findings.

What did the Girls Say?

User engagement provided us with a lot(!) of inspiring data to process and analyze. By clustering quotes and insights, we could start to identify some recurring themes within the data.

Diving into the girls' perspectives was a truly intriguing journey, lined with such complexity and nuance. Dualities highlighted how any one thing could be experienced in many different ways, further emphasizing the notion of inbetween-ness that is so central to understanding the lived experiences of this age group.

Small pedestrian streets at times evoke a sense of discovery, but at others can feel a bit scary. Being alone offers an anonymity that can be freeing at times, and restricting at others. In the company of your friends you can really let go and act silly, but it's also with friends that you might find yourself doing something you're unsure of.

See some of the recurring themes to the right, and dive into their spatial implications in our Design Guide.

Adults' assumptions about their lives

Desire to participate

Urban art

Play, curiosity and exploration

Being controlled

Inbetween-ness

Being in control

Spatial awareness

Leisure

Relation to other things and people

Active passiveness and hanging out

Mobility

Sensory experiences

A Theoretical Framework for Mental Health

Approaching well-being and mental health is unquestionably complex. For many years, the emphasis on mental health, both in research and political discourse, has predominantly centered around the treatment of mental illness and the prevention of risk factors. Consequently, much of our current understanding of the subject revolves around the factors that contribute to mental illness, rather than those contributing to mental well-being.

However, mental health encompasses more than the mere absence of mental illness and unhappiness. Recent studies suggest that numerous positive elements exist, that can actively promote mental well-being. This highlights the significance of a salutogenic rather than pathogenic approach; one that aims to contribute to well-being and promote mental health rather than eliminate the risks factors associated with them. [14]

Having consulted with our group of experts, we decided to draw upon on a theoretical framework from the field of architectural psychology. This framework looks at the built environment and identifies six psychological needs within one's spatial experience that contribute to a sense of well-being and promote mental health. [15]

The Salutogenic approach is all about strengthening the resources in the individual and the society around them in order to promote mental health. Strengthening relationships or capacity building are examples of the Salutogenic approach.

Katrine Rich Madsen
Senior Researcher,
Public Health, SIF, SDU

Stimulation
Sensory input affecting one's thinking or feeling processes. Can generate excitement, interest, discomfort, etc.

Sense of Safety
Condition of feeling secure, feeling that one is not in harms way or in danger of physical/emotional hurt, injury, loss, etc.

Visibility & Recognition
Seeing and being seen, understanding and being understood, recognizing and being recognized.

Levels of Privacy
Varying states of being apart from company or observation of others.

Social Interaction
Processes of reciprocal influence of individuals over one another during social encounter.

Sense of Identity
Perception of the collection of characteristics that define a person or place.

We all have these six basic psychological needs.

Kaya Roessler
Architecture Psychologist
Professor, Dr.phil., SDU

[14] ABC for mental sundhed – Mental sundhedsfremme for alle. Meilstrup C B, Nielsen L, Nelausen M K, Kusier A O., Hinrichsen C, Santini Z. I, Schou-Juul F. 2022.

[145] Roessler, K. (2003); Arkitekturpsychologie, originally from: Fischer, Manfred (1995): Stadtplanung aus der Sicht der Ökologischen Psychologie. Psychologie Verlags Union.

From Theory to Action

Our collected data was interpreted and analyzed in combination with an understanding of these six psychological needs. Providing us with real-life examples, the data demonstrated how these needs play out in individuals' experiences of the city.
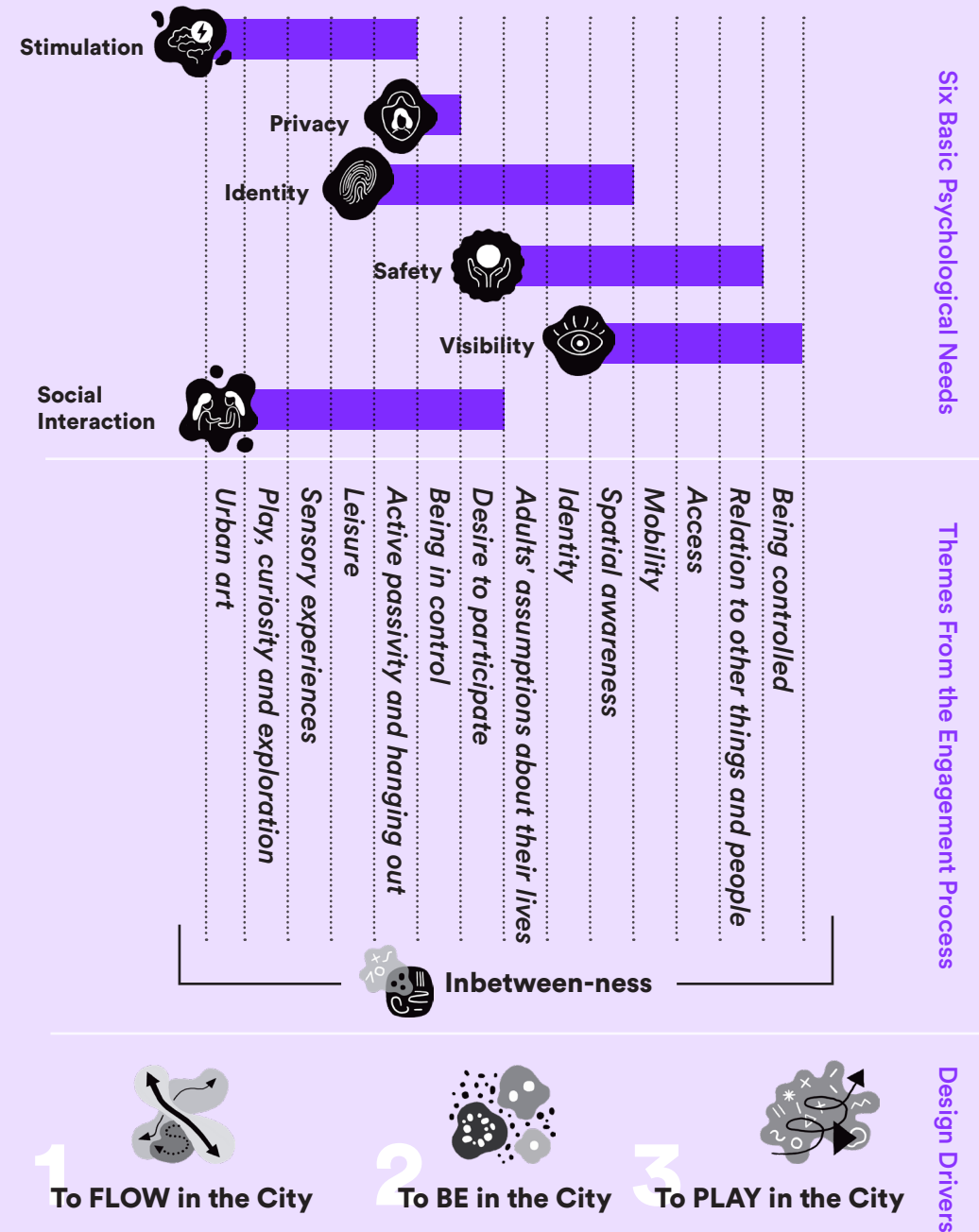
Further grouping, clustering, and analyzing the themes, we arrived at some key areas of focus that were then translated into design drivers to guide the design process. (Find them on pages 34-35).

As mentioned previously, a sense of duality or inbetween-ness was central to these experiences, and further analysis pointed us toward three realms of urban experience in which these needs take form. Together these form the three design drivers that then guided our design process: 'To FLOW', To BE' and 'To PLAY'.

(You can find a bit more on this on the next page and a lot more on this in our Design Manual!)

> **!**
> The diagram on the right is a visualization of our analysis process demonstrating how the framework of six basic psychological needs intersect with the perspectives voiced by the girls, resulting in an overarching theme of inbetween-ness and design drivers to guide an informed design process.

Six Basic Psychological Needs

- Stimulation
- Privacy
- Identity
- Safety
- Visibility
- Social Interaction

Themes From the Engagement Process

- Urban art
- Play, curiosity and exploration
- Sensory experiences
- Leisure
- Active passivity and hanging out
- Being in control
- Desire to participate
- Adults' assumptions about their lives
- Identity
- Spatial awareness
- Mobility
- Access
- Relation to other things and people
- Being controlled

Inbetween-ness

Design Drivers

1 To FLOW in the City

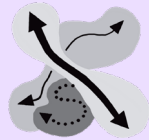2 To BE in the City

3 To PLAY in the City

The Three Design Drivers

In between-ness

The notion of inbetween-ness envelopes our findings, acting as an important concept and consistent red thread throughout the project.

I like being around areas where kids can play. If I were with my family we might spend time in the playground and I might play with my brother. But with my friends, I guess we're just kind of observing the situation from afar, but we wouldn't be pulled towards it.

1 To FLOW in the city

Being part of the flow of the city is both central to the girls' urban experiences and a basic aspect of using the city. Far beyond simply 'getting around', this includes notions of exploration, discovery, observations of urban life, and more.

I don't really stop and sit too much. There's just so much movement in the street and I like being a part of it instead of just watching it.

2 To BE in the city

Being in the city refers to the experience of feeling drawn to urban spaces as spaces in which to spend time. Whether being with your friends or being on your own, a positive experience of urban space is one that attracts and enables you to be and be comfortable in the city.

I definitely like city vibes. I like that there are so many people around, and buildings everywhere and you can just see small glimpses of people's lives and stuff. I'll do this thing where I look at people and then I imagine stories about their lives.

3 To PLAY in the city

This concept was extremely present in the girls' experiences but the word 'play' has childlike associations and is thus not the word they would use. That said, using imagination, inventing stories or games, being silly, and toying with what it might be like to be an adult, all these and more culminate in an expanded notion of play enabled by the city.

We always find something to do. We come up with games ourselves, there doesn't need to be a basketball hoop or something like that... All is possible, and sometimes we just play hide and seek, it's fun.

Do's & Don'ts of Participation

Here are some key considerations and learnings in undertaking such processes of user engagement.

Do not insert preconceived notions of gender into the conversation.
Returning to the dominance of certain norms and narratives, we do not wish to iterate these or to assume that the girls experience them in the same way. If gender is a matter of concern in their lives, it will come from them.

Do not make assumptions. Be willing to unlearn what you know.
The premise for qualitative data collection is that they have knowledge that you do not. This knowledge comes in the form of lived experiences, needs and preferences, behaviors, habits, intuition, fears, discomfort, comfort, wellbeing, satisfaction, joy, etc.

Do not look only for patterns, look for complexity, nuance, and diversity.
By representing themselves, your informants can offer insight about trends and preferences within their age group in the things they have in common but through their differences they also demonstrate an inspiringly broad spectrum of characteristics, behaviors, and needs.

Be mindful of intersectionality.
This refers to the combined aspects of one's identity that position the individual in a space of advantage or disadvantage. Things like physical appearance, minority groups, risk groups, socio-economic background, visible/invisible disabilities, sexual orientation, gender, mental illness, and more, all come into play and greatly impact one's experiences in relation to others and to their surroundings.

Be appreciative of their input.
The girls are the experts on their lives and experiences. Besides the learnings that we have to gain from these interactions, this is also an opportunity to empower and instill a sense of agency within them. It is an encouragement to think critically about their surroundings and to feel recognized for their accumulated knowledge and lived experiences

Be prepared to adjust your methods on the spot.
Qualitative social research calls for responsiveness and flexibility with participants. A change of approach or planned activities to accommodate their preferences is not uncommon as interactions should feel conversational and should allow everyone a sense of ownership over the process.
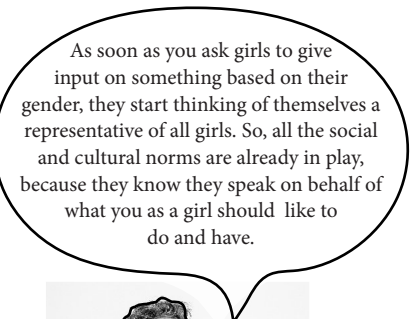
Engage earlier rather than later.
Design and social research can complement each other greatly but for this to happen, timeliness is key. With impactful design decisions often made intuitively and early in a process, user engagement should precede design. Remember to also give yourself the time to collect and analyse the data properly, before translating it into design principles or drivers.

Make room for new knowledge.
Exploring the perspectives of diverse groups is a task that is never completed. One of the truly great things about engaging in this type of research is that is can help us identify spaces for further exploration. Whether investigating the lived experiences of teenage girls in a different city or exploring those of a different user group, we hope the reflections from this process will encourage more of this important work in the future.

As soon as you ask girls to give input on something based on their gender, they start thinking of themselves a representative of all girls. So, all the social and cultural norms are already in play, because they know they speak on behalf of what you as a girl should like to do and have.

Signe Højbjerre Larsen
Researcher and Ph.D. SDU

Sneak Peek into the Design Manual & Next Steps!

The illustration on this page represents the backdrop of an abstract city unfolded in our Design Manual, (the second booklet produced in this project). This city showcases the design drivers, principles, and solutions that were the result of this process.

While our process has focused on the views and lived experiences of teenage girls, design informed by these perspectives embodies truly exciting potentials within inclusive design, with benefits that extend far beyond this user group.

Having read through this process guide, whether you're a designer, municipality, researcher, consultant, foundation, or social organization... we imagine that, like us, you want to be part of improving urban spaces for girls and young women!

So, what are the next steps?
If you're feeling inspired by this project, do get in touch to share your ideas, continue the discussion, and find ways to work together on similar user engagement processes.

AND secondly, let us continue to seek the lived experiences of diverse user groups to design our cities with care and consideration for all.

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Urban Minded